

## EDITORIAL

### ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION AND TURNAROUND TIME

*Public Health Reports* has greatly increased the speed with which manuscripts go through the review process. We sometimes send decisions about publication to authors in as little as a month. More commonly, authors receive a response after review in eight weeks. Of course there are glaring exceptions and we are trying to do better.

Each reviewer is queried for willingness to review by e-mail, fax, or telephone before a manuscript and review package is dispatched by courier service. Our follow-up correspondence with authors and reviewers is increasingly conducted by e-mail.

Because *Public Health Reports* has upgraded its computers with a new set of Macintoshes, we are able to translate almost every manuscript into Word 6.0.1 for Macintosh, in which we work, and back into the original format before returning it. This means we are now able to receive submissions electronically and transmit them to most reviewers in the same way.

We would like to encourage authors to send their covering letters by e-mail, with the manuscript appended as an electronic attachment. This will help speed the manuscript to reviewers and the results back to the authors. With a little luck, our turnaround will shrink further.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### COMBATING MAD COW DISEASE IN THE UNITED STATES

The ominous and enigmatic shadows cast by mad cow disease and other mysterious spongiform encephalopathies, including its human Creutzfeldt-Jacob form, are the subject of Richard Rhodes's newest book, *Deadly Feasts*,<sup>1</sup> reviewed in *Public Health Reports* in the July/August issue.<sup>2</sup> Rhodes explores this problem with the same scrupulous scholarship and insight that characterize his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*,<sup>3</sup> and its sequel, *Dark Sun*,<sup>4</sup> the story of the development of the hydrogen bomb.

It is clear that although the potential magnitude of the problem is difficult to evaluate because of scientific uncertainties and a range of possible scenarios, the threat is sufficiently serious and real to warrant taking vigorous preventive measures both in this and other countries. This may prove difficult given the strength and size of

commercial agricultural interests.

In Britain, which has been struggling with an epidemic of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) since the 1980s, an estimated one million cattle have so far been infected and have entered the food chain,<sup>5</sup> but the government has been seen to be less than vigorous in pursuing preventive measures. More recently, the British government has been accused of suppressing information, of obfuscation, and of obstructing scientific inquiry to an extent sufficient to warrant severe criticism by a committee of inquiry of the European Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

Until the last 12 to 18 months, BSE was not seen as an American problem, either presently or potentially. That perception has changed. Although American-bred cattle have experienced no cases, American elk, mule deer, and mink are infected and it is now clear that the disease has considerable capacity to cross species barriers. Moreover, during 1996, 14 human cases occurred in Britain and

one in France that appear to have been caused by the agent responsible for BSE. Whether these cases represent rare occurrences or are the first in an epidemic wave remains to be seen.<sup>7</sup>

In June, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued new regulations.<sup>8</sup> In simplified terms, the regulations now require that in processing animals to make feed supplements for ruminants such as cows that the rendering plants and feed mills exclude tissues from mammals that might be infected with transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). This would prohibit using the carcasses of cows, sheep, elk, deer, and mink. This is a prudent step which, if enforced, should go far toward preventing a national epidemic of BSE such as occurred in Britain.

However, the FDA makes no provision to assure that infected or possibly infected carcasses are excluded from the production of pet food products. This is a curious omission given the fact that numerous cases of spongi-